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A long way from home and family, Williams is the model of perfection

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Hunter Cardone is already at the center of the mat, his fate all but decided. A few feet away, Mike Williams is sauntering up, methodically adjusting his head gear. Once that is in place, Williams stretches his legs and arches his back. Like the slugger who steps out of the batter's box to adjust and re-adjust his batting gloves in between every pitch, Williams doesn't dig in until he is good and ready.

Finally, he crouches into the starting position — and smiles.

Thirty-one seconds later — or approximately the same amount of time it took him to take his spot in the first place — it is over.

PLAINFIELD, N.J., ISN'T the biggest town in the country, with a population of around 47,000. But it is only 18 miles from Newark, putting it at least in the shadow of a large city.

And that was big enough and close enough for Joe and Theresa Williams to want Mike to move to

Sanford and live with his grandmother, Leola.

So, on Oct. 12, Williams started his first day at Southern Lee High School. Before the final bell sounded, he was introduced to wrestling coach Mike Short.

"The first day he was here, Coach (Cletus) Gore came to me

and said, 'This kid's a wrestler,'" Short recalls. "I've been coaching wrestling for 13 years, and I don't know how many times I've heard, 'I'm a wrestler', and it turns out to be a whole lot of nothing."

That was the first introduction. The first impression came a bit later.

"I got him on the mat, and that's my way to gauge just how good somebody is," Short says. "I'm a lot bigger than a lot of the guys, so I tend to take it easier on the smaller ones. I realized real soon that I

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didn't have to do that with Mike. I could beat on him, and he could beat right back.

"Once I saw him on the mat, I was like, this kid's no joke."

Nobody kept score at that match. But they should've. It may go down as Williams' only loss of the season. After all, Williams was giving up nearly 60 pounds to his coach.

Then again, who's to say he lost? *

Cardone, South Johnston's 140-pound wrestler, is overmatched from the start. Before the referee's first whistle, Williams leads 6-0.

After that whistle, Williams feels a cramp in his right calf. He takes a step back and asks Short to massage the muscle. The referee signals for injury time to begin. If Williams can't continue in 5 minutes, the victory will be awarded Cardone.

Instead, it is only a brief respite for Cardone. Williams shakes off the lingering pain and comes back to the center of the mat. If Cardone's shoulders slump, no one should blame him. Seventeen more seconds await him. If only he knew. Maybe he does.

WILLIAMS BEGAN WRESTLING at 3 years old. Joe, who was an accomplished wrestler and boxer growing up, was his son's coach from day 1. He longed to wrap Mike's hands and send him into the squared ring.

"My dad was good," Williams says. "In high school, a lot of my teachers would tell me how good he was. He was an even better

boxer, and that's what he really wanted me to do. But I didn't want to get my face too beat up."

The 28-foot circle on a 4-inch mat would have to do.

"He comes from a family that wrestles," Joe Williams says. "It's a family thing."

Mike took to the sport almost immediately. Once he realized he had a talent for it, Joe pushed him. Pushed him hard.

And the pushing was paying off.

"When I first started, I was pretty decent," Mike says. "And then when I was 10, I won a recreation league state championship. After that, I got really excited about it."

Three state junior titles followed.

But one thing Mike wasn't too excited about was his education. On top of that, his dad was suffering from neck problems that would require surgery.

Joe Williams had a decision to make.

Cardone probably saw what was coming. He just couldn't do anything about it. In a flash, Williams has Cardone and turns him to his back. After that, it's all physics. Force. Weight. Leverage.

The referee simultaneously slaps the mat and blows his whistle. It is over. Williams hops up, his right arm ready for the referee to raise it.

HIS GRADES SLUMPING, Mike Williams was headed out of town.

That was a tough thing. He had grown up in Plainfield. Had many friends there.

But that was part of the problem.

"I wasn't doing anything bad. But I wasn't focused on my grades like I should've been," Williams says. "A lot

of my friends were athletes, and when you have guys you grew up with in class, it's easy to get distracted."

So off to Sanford he went to live with his father's mother. It's nothing new for the Williams' family. Mike's twin sister made the move before him.

But this was different. Joe was Mike's coach. Joe was Mike's mentor. Joe was Mike's toughest foe, his harshest critic, his dad.

"He's always trying to be a critic," Williams says. "But I listen to him because he knows me better than anybody and he knows my biggest flaws."

But Joe needed surgery, and Mike only had two years of high school eligibility left. And Joe needed time to recuperate before he and Theresa could make the move with their son.

"I had surgery, and I didn't want it to distract Mike," Joe says. "I didn't want him to have to deal with any of that. It was better that he get away from here."

For the first time in his life, Joe would have to miss one of Mike's matches.

"I'd never missed one of his matches," Joe says. "We traveled all over for tournaments, from Tennessee to Maryland to Penn State. We always wrestled where the good kids were. I took him all over."

Mike talks to his parents every day. He details his matches. He is told to mind his grandmother, his teachers, his coach and his grades.

Sometimes those talks come right after a match. Joe will call and get a play-by-play of his son's performance through the static of a cell phone.

Technologically so close, realistically so far away.

"I can tell that they want to be down here," Williams says of his parents. "Every

time I talk to him, my dad's like, 'I'm going to be down there soon.' And I just say to wait until states. That's when I want them here."

The Williamses are scheduled to make the move sometime in January. That will be in plenty of time for the state tournament.

But they will miss Christmas.

"I'm used to being with them for Christmas," Mike says. "The last couple of years I started getting out of the whole Christmas thing, but I'll miss them."

Then there's that smile again. It's the one that signals to you that something good is about to happen.

Or bad, depending on which side of the mat you're on.

"But we've got a tournament around that time anyway. Maybe I can take it out on a lot of those guys."

Four days after dusting Cardone, Williams wrestles at the Sweet 16 match at Pinecrest High School. He finishes the day 3-0, beating fourth-ranked Wes Little from Chatham Central 2-0 in the championship match. It Williams' second tournament title in as many weeks.

With the rest of the season ahead of him, Williams is 14-0.

He hasn't even been scored on. Winning most of his matches by technical pinfalls, Williams has racked up a staggering 148-0 points advantage.

The word is out. Williams has shot through the rankings. He's in North Carolina now, and he's known. Known as the second-best wrestler at 140 pounds in all of the 3-A classification.

On the morning of Thursday, Feb. 22, the state tournament begins.

Mike Williams should be there.

So should Joe.